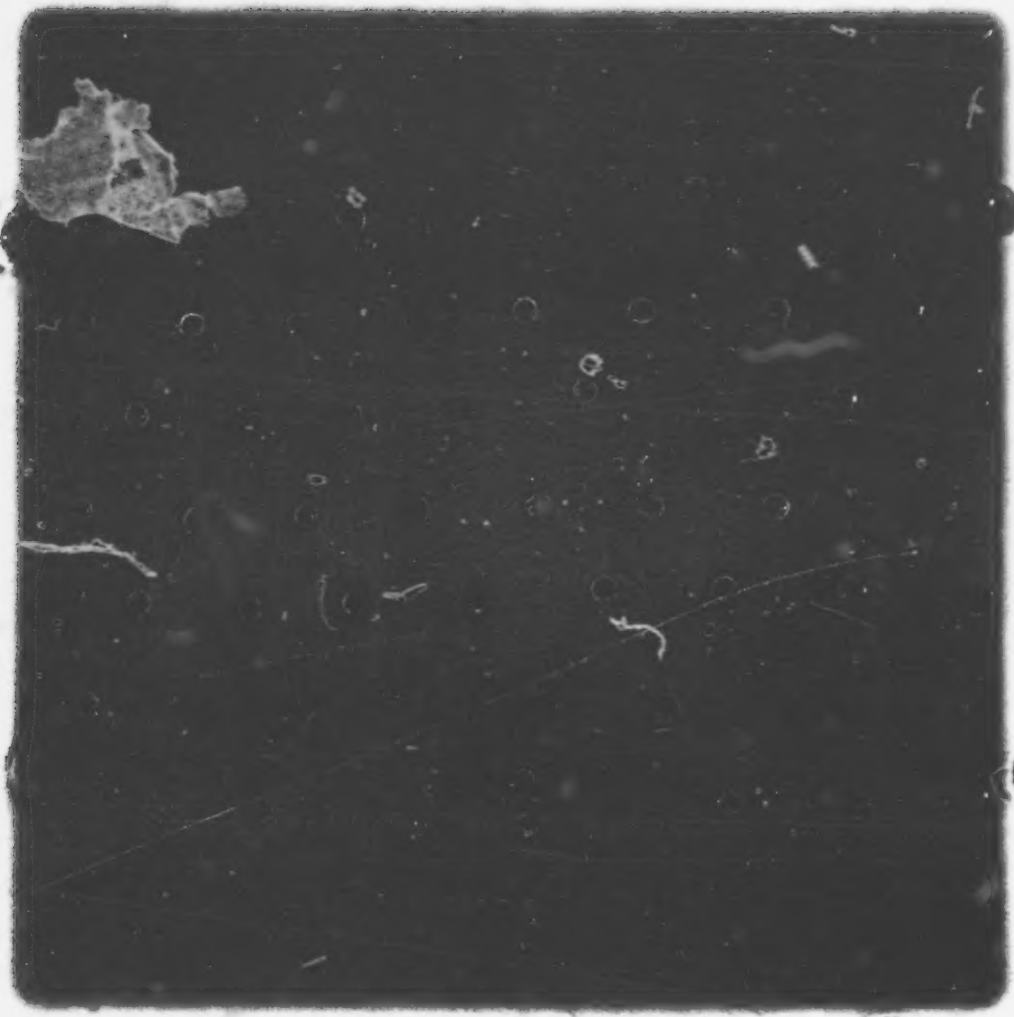
CORA CLUETT
SCAVENGER'S DAUGHTER



in museums of *modern* art, but rather modernism in culture, i.e. Western thinking since the age of enlightenment -- think Réne Descartes rather than Pablo Picasso and you'll get the gist) and it is one that he saw as under pressure from a newer mode of thinking – a *serial* mode. Series are different, Eco argues because they are open-ended, they are not about conclusions but about process: "...serial thought aims at the production of history and not at the rediscovery, beneath history, of the atemporal abscissae of all possible communication. In other words, the aim of structural thought is *to discover*, whereas that of serial thought is *to produce*.[2]"

Abscissae are points in a coordinate system, so Eco is proposing that an *Ur*-structure, the defining concept of Structuralism, is not an aspect of serial thought. Rather, serial thought strives to make such structures, each unique to its own form of communication. Codes are, that is, codes certainly exist, but not as something beneath history, something common to all communication. What possible substrate could sustain such a code? Certainly not a canvas. And if such a code were conceivable, what possible skin could contain it?

Eco's idea is, it seems to me, central to thinking about the visual arts. His analysis of what has come to be called late modernism – the art of the 60s and 70s – leads into post modernism and the return in much new art to concerns and ideas drawn from high modernism. Abstraction, in particular, never made it past the modern to the post, as it were, and as the focus of the art world returns from forays into cultural, thematic and material pluralism, we discover, again, that there is still more to say with paint and canvas.

Serial structure, though seemingly an oxymoron, is the phrase Eco leads us to, a phrase that neatly dovetails with the tendency in much art to be both open-ended and highly structured: "Series will no longer be a negation of structure; rather, it will be the expression of a structure that questions itself and sees itself as a historical phenomenon...In other words, series will be a structure that, recognizing itself as the mere temporal manifestation of an ulterior code, is constantly looking for it within itself, in a state of continuous tension and permanent methodological doubt which can alone produce meaning.[3]"

The crux is in the context – works like those in *Scavenger's Daughter* do not purport to provide answers, nor do they strive to reward one correct reading. There may be an ulterior code, but it is as simple as the orderly progression of the grids that provide the content for these works. Cluett's paintings eschew singular meaning, while all the time suggesting myriad possible meanings. There are no secrets here, though there is mystery. Unlike text, or even unlike images, there is nothing to decode in these works. The structure that underpins these works, the grids that are the closest thing to a picture you will find in these paintings, carry no semiotic or symbolic freight. For Cluett, that train has left the station.

Open works are pointers, hints that suggest a certain direction for thinking. They are also, emphatically, things in and of themselves. Open works, such as these paintings, are focal points for our attention, but are not texts for our intellect. As focal points then, ideas and emotions coalesce around them. We imaginatively write on these skins, these palimpsests, as does each viewer in turn. In the end, the process, of their making and of their perception, is its own reward.

Ray Cronin
Halifax, 2003

1 From "The Time Around Scars," Michael Ondaatje, *The Dainty Monsters*, (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1967)

2 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, tr. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989)

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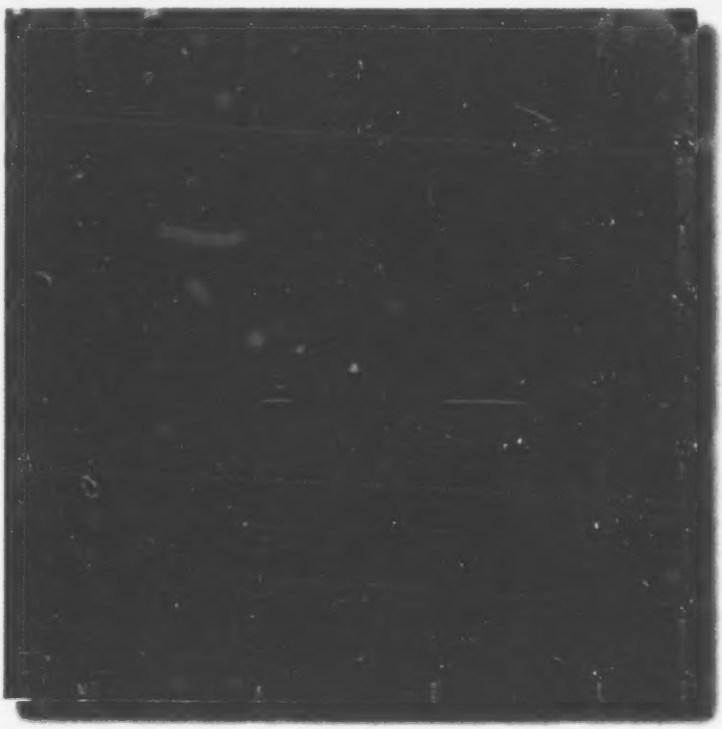


As If It Were Settled, 2003
oil on canvas on board, 91.4 x 91.4 cm

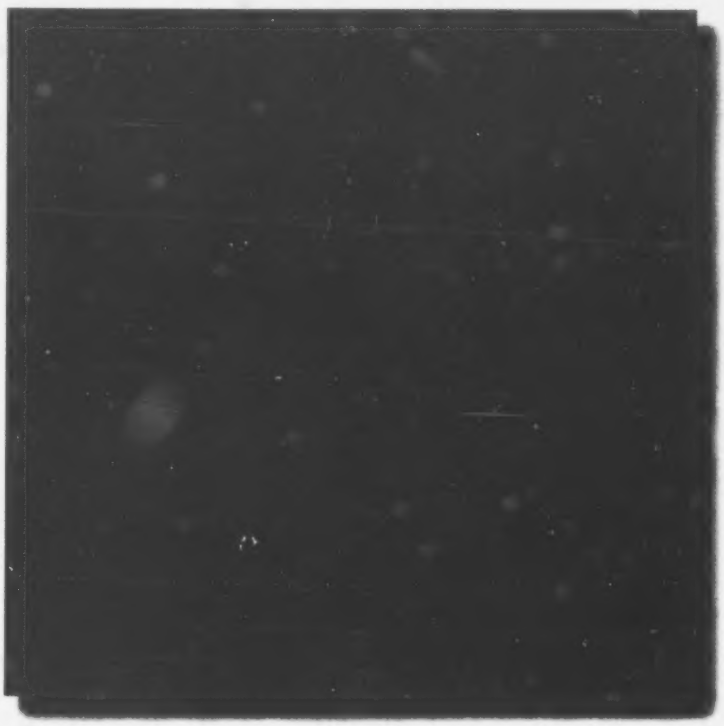
Scavenger's Daughter, the title of this exhibition by Cora Cluett, is also part of the title of one of the paintings in this exhibition (*After All – Scavenger's Daughter*). What's more, it is the name for a particularly gruesome torture device that was on display in the Tower of London. Now, that is an admittedly odd juxtaposition, but one whose logic is apparent once one does a little digging.

Cluett is interested in the inherent duality of mind and body – particularly in areas where that duality breaks down. After all, we humans tend to live in our heads, to "think too much" as Paul Simon sang. By thinking too much for our own good, as Buddha and countless others have taught, we distort our relationship to the physical world. Other animals simply exist in the world, not for them the weary distinction between thought and feeling, between what I think I know and what I physically experience. Throughout human history people have sought out means of breaking down the distinction between the mind and the body, seeking enlightenment, grace, revelation, divination and more. The middle zone of our quotidian lives is no place for such seeking though. To find it, we go to extremes – extremes of pleasure, of anger, of hunger, of exhaustion and, yes, of pain. It is only at the edges, it seems, that we let our surfaces slip to reveal the animals below.

These paintings embody the battle between thinking and being, between thought and deed. In their composition, the simple repetition of grids of coloured dots, they reflect the abstract notion of an ideal, mathematical existence. The grid, that great modernist crutch, supposedly has no aesthetics, no expression, no meaning, beyond the rather arid meaning of its own construction. "I am because I repeat myself at predictable intervals over a planar surface." Well, yeah, but here that surface just doesn't lie down and take it. Rather, the very materials of the grid seem to be rising up in rebellion, oozing out of line, seeping to one side or the other, leaking at inopportune moments. Like our minds, these grids are saddled with a body that goes its own way, that too often fails to live up to the ideal. The austere beauty of the grid, that cool mathematical construct, the promise that order will prevail, is undercut by another beauty – the warm beauty of light as it is expressed in colour, the hot beauty of change, a chaotic, fluid, beauty insecurely harnessed to the order of mathematics. The battle is engaged and any victory is bound to be a Phyrric one – there are no winners in this debate, nor losers either, just participants.

Cluett's works are fluid constructs – the results of a series of pours. Her paintings are made up of multiple glazes, punctuated by the grid as islands dot a lake. Cluett's painting style is rooted in her training as a photographer. The pouring of glazes, the manipulation of the flat surface to distribute the paint, the prodding and poking of the surface as it skins over, all mimic the physical processes she once used for photographic work. Her first paintings, completed while a graduate student at the University of Guelph, were also about the surface, though less about colour. In these works Cluett built up skins that she stamped into, creating text-like patterns that referenced the e-mail text of emoticons. Kisses, winks and smiles, the emotional short-hand of a busy business day. The texts have become the grids in the new work, the layers are fewer and more translucent. In this later work the focus shifts from being on the surface to one aiming through the surface. In these paintings the artist eschews text and expresses a yearning for light.

In a seminal book on aesthetics, the Italian philosopher, semiotician, and novelist Umberto Eco wrote about the differences between what he described as series and structure in contemporary visual art and letters. Structure, he argues in *The Open Work*, is the quintessential modern approach (not *modern* as in modernism in painting and



Folded Them Round, 2003
oil on canvas on board, 91.4 x 91.4 cm

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As If It Were Settled, 2003
oil on canvas on board, 91.4 x 91.4 cm

List of works

Unless otherwise noted, all works are from the collection of the artist.

Day After Day, 2003
oil on canvas on board
22.9 x 22.9 cm

Sudden At The End, 2003
oil on canvas on board
91.4 x 91.4 cm

As If It Were Settled, 2003
oil on canvas on board
91.4 x 91.4 cm

At The Same Time, 2003
oil on canvas on board
91.4 x 91.4 cm

Week After Week, 2003
oil on canvas on board
91.4 x 91.4 cm

Month After Month, 2003
oil on canvas on board
91.4 x 91.4 cm

Folded Them Round, 2003
oil on canvas on board
91.4 x 91.4 cm

Aimlessly By Itself, 2003
oil on canvas on board
91.4 x 91.4 cm

A Glimpse Only, 2003
oil on canvas on board
61.0 x 61.0 cm

There and Then, 2003
oil on canvas on board
91.4 x 91.4 cm

Separate From That, 2003
oil on canvas on board
91.4 x 91.4 cm

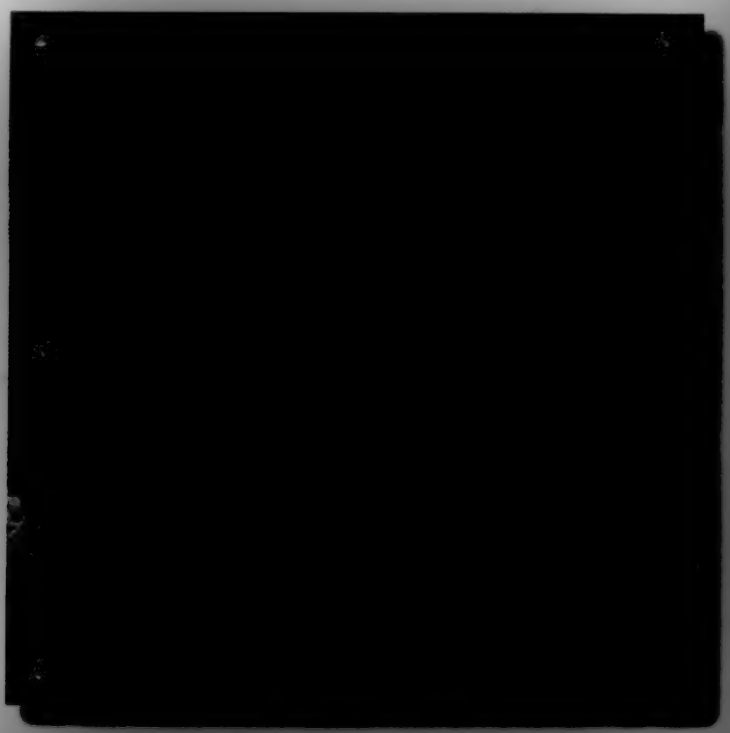
As Before, 2003
oil on canvas on board
61.0 x 61.0 cm

Within Touch, 2003
oil on canvas on board
61.0 x 61.0 cm
Collection of Sara Cluett and Brad Proctor

At A Time, 2003
oil on canvas on board
61.0 x 61.0 cm

After All - Scavenger's Daughter, 2003
oil on canvas on board
91.4 x 91.4 cm

Some Random Light, 2003
oil on canvas on board
91.4 x 91.4 cm



A Glimpse Only, 2003
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13 September - 09 November, 2003
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in Memory of Henry B Rhude (1)
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

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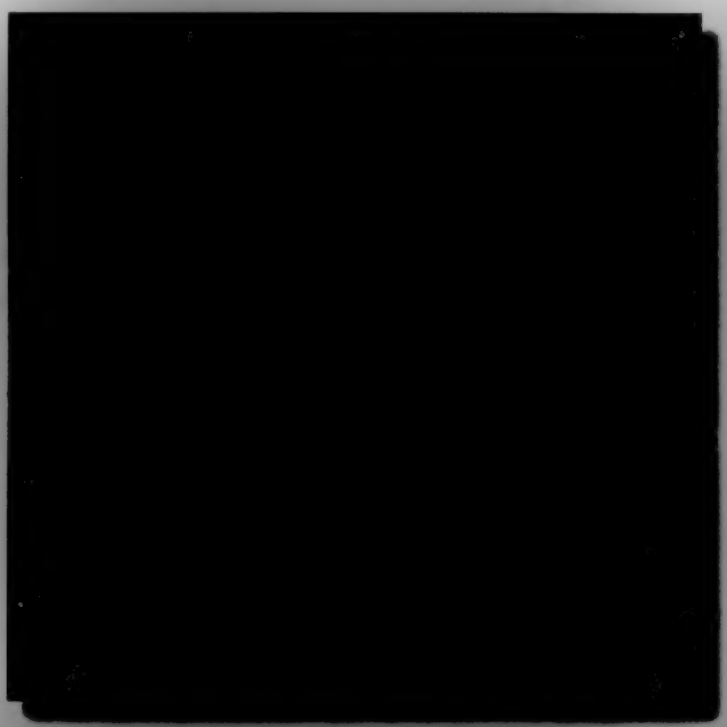
– Cora Cluett

the artist

Cora Cluett received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Guelph. She was a lecturer at Duncan of Jordanstone School of Fine Arts in Dundee, Scotland, until the Summer of 2003. She was artist in residence at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia from July - September, 2003. In November of 2003 Cluett assumed an assistant professorship at the University of Waterloo.



Week After Week, 2003
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